

Testimony of
Steven Emerson
Before the
The United States Helsinki Commission
“The Russian-Syrian Connection: Thwarting Democracy in
the
Middle East and the Greater OSCE Region”

March 9, 2005

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Chairman Brownback and distinguished members of the Helsinki Commission: I applaud you for holding today's hearing on how Russia has increasingly played a dangerous role in undermining the movement for democracy in the Middle East. Russia has helped to empower and strengthen a regime that is allowing terrorist groups to carry out murderous attacks on civilians in Israel and on American forces in Iraq.

Today, as signs of positive change seem to be sweeping parts of the Middle East, one country remains seemingly impervious to the calls for democracy while it continues to harbor, support and actively collaborate in the commission of international terrorism: Syria. That Syria has received such extensive financial, political and military support from Russia recently has enormous consequences: Such support by Russia has only served to empower and embolden Bashar Assad's regime and to give it new resolve to avoid withdrawing from Lebanon entirely; in continuing attacks on Israelis through terrorist groups headquartered in Damascus and in Lebanon; in continuing to allow, perhaps even encourage international jihadists to use Syria as a way-station in their infiltration of Iraq to kill Americans and Iraqis; and to try to play the spoiler in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Indeed, following the destruction of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq, Syria now fills the rather dubious role of being one of the headquarters for Terror Inc., (alongside Iran), with full support for murderous Palestinian terrorist groups based in Damascus that have routinely carried out horrific acts of terrorism against Israelis and Americans living in Israel (the most recent being the Islamic Jihad-directed suicide attack that killed 5 young Israelis at a nightclub in Tel Aviv); funneled weapons, arms and provided sanctuary to jihadists smuggled across the border with Iraq in order to kill American soldiers; facilitated the transfer of explosives, automatic weapons, and missiles and rockets to Hizbollah, the Iranian-created Shiite terrorist group in Lebanon whose goal remains unremitting in its aim to destroy Israel; allowed senior Iraqi Ba'athists to escape and receive sanctuary; and encourages state-run media and state-supported clerics to routinely issue declarations justifying the murder of Americans and Israelis or espousing outlandish conspiracy theories that ultimately inspire attacks on both Israelis and Americans.

The assassination of Rafiq Hariri by Syrian intelligence and the Syrian collaboration with the Islamic Jihad, headquartered in Damascus, in the murder of 5 Israelis, represent only the latest culmination of acts of murderous terrorism by the Syrian regime over a 30-plus year period. When Hafez al Assad passed away and was succeeded by his son, Bashar,

there was some hope that the new leader, given his Western educational background, would embark on a campaign to democratize Syria and withdraw its traditional support for terrorism. But this would not be the case.

Perhaps we should not expect Bashar al Assad to pursue a course any different than the totalitarian path pursued by his father. Very few times in history have children of dictators behaved any differently than their parents. But with respect to trying to change the regime in Syria, there are other actors that the United States must hold to account in their continued support of the murderous regime in Damascus

In one of the most brazen acts of empowering a rogue regime with blood on its hands, Russia announced only two days after Syrian intelligence agents murdered former Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri that it would upgrade Syria's air missile systems with the sale of the SA-18 Igla missile systems, the sophisticated shoulder fire anti-aircraft missiles. These missiles not only pose a dire threat to Israeli civilian and military aircraft in the small confines of Israeli airspace but they also threaten US flights in neighboring Iraq. Moreover and most ominously, given Syria's long demonstrable record of transferring sophisticated weaponry to other terrorist groups, in particular Hizbollah in Lebanon, the provision of such weapons to Syria by the Russians is a flagrant effort by Russia to destabilize the Middle East, undermine Israeli security as well as threaten that of the United States. Indeed, one would be reckless not to assume that these weapons might ultimately find their way into the hands of terrorists in Lebanon, Gaza or Iraq.

Given the stakes at hand, the United States should make it very clear to Russia that such a sale will disrupt any of the newly established trade, economic and technological relationships between the US and Russia. If that fails to sway Mr. Putin, then the US needs to ratchet up the political and economic pressure on Russia to levels that have not been imposed since the end of the Cold War. It is manifestly clear that Russia is violating the terms of the OSCE Annex of December 2002 to which Russia is a party.

In January of this year, Assad traveled to Moscow for a four-day official visit. Mr. Putin gave him a veritable Christmas present but the stockings contained not children's toys but a package of assistance that was designed to bolster the Syrian regime: Russia forgave \$10 billion of Syrian debt; committed to sell arms and weapons to Syria (as well as other radical regimes); gave a political vote of support including vetoing or abstaining from any UN resolution critical of the Syrians; and provided an array of wide-ranging technological and industrial investments.

According to *The Weekly Standard* of March 2, 2005, "[t]he Russians have also agreed to a number of economic agreements with Syria. Syria's economy has long been dependent upon commerce in Lebanon. With the coming Syrian retreat, Assad is desperate for economic relief. In an interview with the Russian government daily, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Assad explained a number of areas in which Syria and Russia will cooperate, including: 'surveying oil fields and refining oil,' constructing 'an oil and gas pipeline from Iraq to the Mediterranean,' and possibly creating 'industrial zones with a view to delivering

commodities to Iraq’ through which ‘Syria could provide preferential terms for Russian companies to work in these zones.’”¹

For Russia, the newly established close relationship with and influence over Syria is a throwback to the days during the superpower confrontation when Russia automatically supported any Arab regime that resisted an alliance with the West or the United States. After the disintegration of the Soviet empire, Syria and other terrorist states and movements lost their prime financial, political and military sponsor. But over time, Russia has begun to resume the pernicious and destructive role it played during the Cold War, providing dangerous technology and weaponry to both the Syrian and Iranian regimes, not to mention other terrorist supporting regimes. To be sure, Russia’s destructive role in Syria was not terminated at the end of the Cold War. In 2000-2001, Russia agreed to sell Syria \$2 billion worth of military equipment including jet fighters.

The tragic irony of what Russia is doing has not been lost: Although Russia justifiably wants Western support in its war against Islamic terrorists operating in Chechnya, at the very same time Russia is arming terror-supporting regimes and movements, directly and indirectly, that have allied themselves with the very terrorists that carried out the horrific Beslan attack last year that killed some 700 Russians, most of them children.

The statements issued by Putin and Assad during that trip in January are worth replicating in its entirety. I have attached them as Attachments A and B to my testimony. What is most striking about it is that while it claims to be supportive of peace efforts, its naked transparency of promoting an anti-democratic and pro-terrorist agenda is easily seen. The love fest between Putin and Assad is all the more upsetting in light of the demonstrable record of Syria in supporting terrorist organizations launching terrorist attacks on Israelis. It bears restating and enumerating the extent to which Syria has been involved in terrorism over the last four years—if only to demonstrate that Russia cannot evade responsibility for claiming that it is unaware of the consequences of the murderous regime it is empowering and emboldening.

SYRIAN SUPPORT FOR PALESTINIAN TERRORISM

According to the U.S. government, Damascus provides “political and material support” to at least four Palestinian terrorist groups: Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. These groups have claimed responsibility for multiple anti-Israeli terrorist acts since the start of the so-called “Second Intifada.” The Ba’athist regime continues to insist that the Damascus-based offices of these organizations are involved in only “political and informational” activities,² but investigations by Israeli

¹Thomas Joscelyn, “Axis of Outcast,” *The Daily Standard*, March 2, 2005.

²U.S. State Department, Patterns of Global Terrorism – 2003, Released April 29, 2004, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2003/31644.htm>.

intelligence indicate their direct operational and strategic role in planning scores of deadly terrorist attacks.³

TERRORIST TRAINING CAMPS IN SYRIA

Syria serves as a training ground for several terrorist groups, with the direct knowledge and support of Syrian officials. According to former FBI intelligence analyst Matthew Levitt, operatives “are met at the Jordanian-Syrian border by Syrian officials, who check their documents without stamping them and literally escort them to Damascus for training...Members of the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, renegade Fatah Tanzim, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad have all been escorted through Jordan into Syria.”⁴

One such camp is the Ayn Tzahab camp, supported by the Iranian government and used for operational training of Palestinian groups, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

The training “curriculum” at the camp includes instruction in sabotage, artillery training, manufacturing of explosive devices and bomb belts, kidnapping, and guerilla warfare.⁵

Additionally, Syria continues to permit Iran (arguably the world’s preeminent state sponsor of terror) to use Damascus as a hub for providing Hizballah with weapons and funds in Lebanon.⁶

Syrian President Bashar Assad has himself expressed vocal support for Palestinian terrorist groups. At an Arab League Summit in Beirut in 2002, he said: "As far as an occupier is concerned, **there is no distinction between soldiers and civilians...** There is a distinction between armed and unarmed, but in Israel everyone is armed. In any case, we adopted the following concept: resistance to occupation is a legitimate right."⁷

High-ranking leaders of Palestinian terrorist groups, including Khaled Meshal and Musa Abu Marzook of Hamas, and Ramadan Abdullah Shallah of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, have been given safe haven in Damascus. Although there have been press reports that Damascus has finally expelled Meshal and Shallah, the Syrian government has a track record of deception on this matter. Assad’s government has, in the past, publicly claimed

³ “Iran and Syria as Strategic Support for Palestinian Terrorism,” September 30, 2002, http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/mfaarchive/2000_2009/2002/9/iran%20and%20syria%20as%20strategic%20support%20for%20palestina.

⁴ Matthew Levitt, “Iran and Syria: State Sponsorship in the Age of Terror Networks,” March 7, 2005, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC07.php?CID=230>.

⁵ “IDF Action in Syria,” October 5, 2003, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/government/communiques/2003/idf+action+in+syria++oct+5-+2003.htm>.

⁶ U.S. State Department, Patterns of Global Terrorism – 2003, Released April 29, 2004, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2003/31644.htm>.

⁷ “Iran and Syria as Strategic Support for Palestinian Terrorism,” September 30, 2002, http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/mfaarchive/2000_2009/2002/9/iran%20and%20syria%20as%20strategic%20support%20for%20palestina.

to deport such individuals, while instead only asking the terrorist leadership to lower their profile rather than leave the country.⁸

TERRORIST ATTACKS INSIDE ISRAEL LINKED TO SYRIA

Since the “Second Intifada” erupted in September of 2000, over one thousand Israelis have been killed and thousands more injured by Palestinian terrorists.⁹

As I outlined earlier, the Syrian government, by acts of commission and omission, is involved, both directly and indirectly, in the overwhelming majority of Palestinian terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians.

According to the Israeli government, in 2004 alone, Hamas committed a staggering 555 terrorist attacks, up from 218 attacks in 2003. Similarly, Islamic Jihad also became more active in 2004, carrying out 106 terror attacks, 35 more than the previous year.¹⁰

The most recent suicide bombing in Israel, a February 25 attack on a nightclub in Tel Aviv, which claimed 5 lives and injured 65 others, was orchestrated in Damascus.¹¹ White House press secretary Scott McClellan recently stated that the U.S. government has “firm evidence that the bombing in Tel Aviv was not only authorized by Palestinian Islamic Jihad leaders in Damascus, but that Islamic Jihad leaders in Damascus participated in the planning.”¹² Moreover, Israeli intelligence asserts that Islamic Jihad's Damascus headquarters spent roughly \$30,000 on the bombing.¹³

Further examples of major terrorist attacks committed, just since 2002, by Palestinian terrorist groups hosted by the regime in Damascus include:

An August 2004 dual suicide bombing of buses in Beersheva, perpetrated by Hamas, killing 16 civilians and injuring 100 more.¹⁴

Five months earlier, Hamas infiltrated the Israeli port of Ashdod, blowing up a shipping container, killing 10 Israelis and wounding 16.¹⁵

⁸ Amos Harel, “Israel doubts Jihad, Hamas leadership Expelled from Syria,” *Haaretz*, March 7, 2005.

⁹ “Four Years of Conflict: Israel’s War against Terrorism,” <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism-+Obstacle+to+Peace/Terrorism+and+Islamic+Fundamentalism-/Four+Years+of+Conflict+3-Oct-2004.htm>.

¹⁰ “Summary of Terrorist Activity 2004,” <http://www.mfa.gov.il/NR/rdonlyres/927D5873-E41C-4C99-BBF0-5A53DF237FCF/0/terrorsummary2004.pdf>.

¹¹ “U.S. Official Implicates Syrian-based Group in Tel Aviv Attack,” CNN, March 2, 2004, <http://edition.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/meast/03/01/syria.attack/>.

¹² Jennifer Loven and Anne Gearan, “U.S.: Terrorists in Syria Bombed Tel Aviv,” *Associated Press*, March 1, 2004.

¹³ “Amos Harel, “Israel doubts Jihad, Hamas leadership Expelled from Syria,” *Haaretz*, March 7, 2005.

¹⁴ “Double Bombing of Buses in Beersheba,” August 31, 2004, http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2004/8/Double%20bombing%20in%20Beersheba%2031-Aug-2004.

In early October of 2003, an Islamic Jihad suicide bomber killed 21 people, including three children and a baby girl, and wounded 60 more at a joint Arab and Jewish owned restaurant in Haifa.¹⁶ Following the attack, Israeli Deputy Defense Minister Zev Boim tied the Islamic Jihad cell in Jenin that perpetrated the attack to Islamic Jihad's leadership in Damascus.¹⁷

In response to that bombing, Israel launched a counterattack against a training camp 24 kilometers outside of Damascus.¹⁸ According to a statement from the Israeli cabinet, the Ein Saheb camp was used by every Palestinian terrorist group.¹⁹ President Bush called the strike "essential" to Israel's national defense.²⁰

A month earlier, a Hamas terrorist detonated a bomb at a hitchhiking post in Tel Aviv, killing 8 Israelis and wounding 32 others. That same day, a Hamas suicide bomber killed 7 people and wounded 50 more at a café in Jerusalem.²¹

Two weeks earlier, on August 19, 2003, a Hamas suicide bomber blew up a bus in Jerusalem, killing 22 commuters while wounding 135 more.²²

On June 18, 2002, another Hamas terrorist boarded a bus in Jerusalem, detonating his suicide belt resulting in the killing of 19 people and injuring 74.²³

Two weeks earlier, and Islamic Jihad terrorists detonated a car bomb next to a bus in the Israeli city of Megiddo, killing 17 and injuring 38 more.²⁴

¹⁵ "Suicide Bombing at Ashdod Port," March 14, 2004, http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2004/3/Suicide%20bombing%20at%20Ashdod%20Port%2014-Mar-2004.

¹⁶ "Suicide Bombing of Maxim Restaurant in Haifa," January 21, 2004, http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2004/1/Suicide%20bombing%20of%20Maxim%20restaurant%20in%20Haifa%20-%202004-O.

¹⁷ Michael Freund, "From Damascus to Ramallah," *The Jerusalem Post*, October 8, 2003.

¹⁸ Matthew Gutman and Janine Zacharia, "Syrian diplomat threatens retaliation," *The Jerusalem Post*, October 9, 2003.

¹⁹ Joshua Brilliant, "Israel Defends Bombing in Syria," *The Jerusalem Post*, October 8, 2003.

²⁰ Janine Zacharia "Bush Backs IAF strike on Syria," *The Jerusalem Post*, October 8, 2003.

²¹ "Suicide Bombings – Tzrifin and Jerusalem – September 9, 2003," September 9, 2003,

http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2003/9/Suicide%20Bombings-%20Tzrifin%20and%20Jerusalem%20-%20September.

²² "Suicide Bombing of No 2 Egged Bus in Jerusalem – 19 August 2003," August 19, 2003, http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2003/8/Suicide+bombing+of+No+2+Egged+bus+in+Jerusalem++1.htm.

²³ "Suicide Bombing at Patt Junction – 18 June 2002," June, 18, 2002, http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2002/6/Suicide%20bombing%20at%20Patt%20junction%20in%20Jerusalem%20-%202018.

²⁴ "Suicide Bombing at Megiddo Junction – 5 June 2002," June 5, 2002, http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2002/6/Suicide%20bombing%20at%20Megiddo%20junction%20-%202005-Jun-2002.

On May 7th of the same year, a Hamas suicide bomber walked into a pool hall in the town of Rishon Letzion, killing 16 and injuring 55 others.²⁵

A month earlier, on April 10th, a Hamas suicide bomber killed 8 people and injured 22 more on a bus traveling to Kibbutz Yagur.²⁶

Just over a week earlier, a Hamas terrorist killed 15 and wounded 40 others at a restaurant in Haifa.²⁷

And on March 27, a Hamas suicide bomber walked into a Passover seder at the Park Hotel in the coastal city of Netanya, killing 22 and injuring 140 more, as they celebrated one of the holiest days on the Jewish calendar.²⁸

SYRIAN DISSIDENT OPPOSITION

In his July 2000 inauguration speech, Syrian president Bashar al Assad—then only 34 years old—spoke of the “desperate need for constructive criticism” of Syria’s ruling Ba’ath Party. In the same speech, he called for greater transparency and “democratic thinking” within Syria, as well as the necessity of economic restructuring.²⁹ His words were seen by Syrian dissidents, both at home and abroad, as the beginning of a new era of reform and a departure from the autocratic ways of his deceased father, Hafez, who presided over a brutal police state for 30 years before his death in June 2000. After years of repression, Syria’s democratic activists—galvanized by what they saw as a genuine desire for reform and openness by Syria’s youthful new President—turned out in full force following Bashar’s ascension, spearheading what became known as the “Damascus Spring.”

Almost immediately, private newspapers emerged to challenge Syria’s state-owned media, and people began to gather together in homes and coffee houses to debate and discuss what they hoped were the beginnings of a free and open society.³⁰ In September 2000, the London based pan-Arabic daily *Al-Hayat* published a statement, signed by 99 Syrian intellectuals, calling on Bashar al Assad to enact political reform in Syria. Among the signatories were the celebrated Syrian poet Adonis, writers Haidar Haidar and Sadek Jalal Al 'Azm, and philosopher Antoine Makdissi.³¹ This bold statement, which became known as the “99 Manifesto” was followed by another shortly thereafter that was signed

²⁵ "Suicide and Other Bombing Attacks in Israel Since the Declaration of Principles (Sept 1993)," <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/terrorism-+obstacle+to+peace/palestinian+terror+since+2000/suicide+and+other+bombing+attacks+in+israel+since.htm>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ <http://www.basharassad.org/english.htm>.

³⁰ Ed O'Loughlin, “Damascus spring becomes winter of discontent,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 2, 2005.

³¹ *Al-Hayat* (London), September 27, 2000.

by roughly one thousand Syrian intellectuals and politicians (and was therefore referred to as the “1,000 Manifesto”). It presented a number of demands to Assad, including: the canceling of Syria’s emergency laws and military rule; the granting of political freedom and freedom of the press; the implementation of democratic elections; the respect and implementation of human rights; the elimination of one-party rule; the elimination of discrimination against women; and the formation of committees for the establishment of a civil society.³² In addition to the “99” and “1,000” manifestos, a group of 70 Syrian lawyers signed a petition calling for political reform and an end to Syria’s emergency laws.³³

All three of these petitions—which, in the past, would have led to the jailing, torture and possibly even execution of the authors—were met with silence by both the Ba’ath Party and the state-controlled Syrian media. At the time, it seemed to some that Bashar al-Assad might have been serious about opening up Syrian society, even pardoning 600 Syrian political prisoners and closing Syria’s notorious military courts. But by February 2001, Assad was taking a far different stance, telling the London-based daily *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* that Syrians were prohibited from criticizing the Ba’ath Party and threatening to punish anyone who endangered the interest of the state. “The development of civil society institutions,” said Assad, “is not one of my priorities.”³⁴

It wasn’t long before Ba’ath Party officials and the Syrian security apparatus were monitoring reformers’ meetings and restricting their movements. Almost as quickly as it began, the Damascus Spring was over—many prominent Syrian reformers were thrown in prison, and at least six are still held today under solitary confinement.³⁵ One leader of the Damascus Spring, Kamal al-Labwani, a physician, was released from prison last year after serving a full three-year sentence for, among other charges, encouraging sedition against the Ba’ath Party. He told the *Sydney Morning Herald*, “Everything that I was charged with was for what I said, for my opinions. They didn’t charge us for anything we did.”³⁶

Following the false promise of the Damascus Spring and the government-ordered crackdowns that followed, the reform movement within Syria moved back underground. The smatterings of news that did emerge were resoundingly negative: for example, in August 2002, economist Aref Dalila and physician Dr. Walid al-Bunni, founding members of the Committee for the Revival of Civil Society in Syria, were sentenced to 10 years in prison on charges that they attempted to change the Syrian constitution by illegal means, incite armed rebellion and spread false information. In 2003, Syrian parliament members Mamoun Homsy and Riad Al-Seif—Al-Seif in particular a persistent and vocal critic of the Ba’ath Party—were sentenced on similar counts to five years in

³² “The Battle for Reforms and Civil Society in Syria - Part I,” February 9, 2001, <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=countries&Area=syria&ID=IA4701>.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* (London), February 8, 2001.

³⁵ Ed O’Loughlin, “Damascus spring becomes winter of discontent,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 2, 2005.

³⁶ *ibid.*

prison. Also in 2003, two well-known political activists, Riad Al-Turk and Habib Saleh, were sentenced to thirty months and three years, respectively.³⁷

As Bashar al-Assad's grip on power tightened, it seemed that the only voices of dissent were coming from Syrians abroad, particularly in Europe and the United States. But with the U.S-led invasion of Syria's next-door neighbor, Iraq, in March 2003, and the subsequent collapse of Saddam Hussein's Baa'thist regime, it seemed that homegrown Syrian reformers were once again emboldened. Encouraged by the Bush administration's talk of a democratic Middle East as well as the increased visibility of democracy-minded Syrian exiles in Washington and Europe, voices for change within Syria began to once again emerge. In October 2003, Syrian-Christian journalist Michel Kilo, who is a member of the Syrian reform movement "The Civil Society," published an article in the Lebanese daily *Al-Nahar* blasting the Syrian regime. Kilo complained, quite aptly, that "When the citizen demands reform, [the Baa'th Party] rebuke him and accuse him of treason."³⁸

This is the type of dictatorial, terrorist-oriented regime with which Russia has struck an alliance, again something inexplicable given the Beslan massacre in Russia. I thank the Commission and you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting me to address this grave matter with you today. I look forward to your questions and to working with you on this in the future.

³⁷ Nir Boms and Erick Stakelbeck, "Assad is Speaking," <http://www.inthenationalinterest.com/Articles/Vol2Issue48/Vol2Issue48Boms.html>.

³⁸ *Al-Nahar* (Lebanon), October 11, 2003.

January 26, 2005

**HEADLINE: STATEMENTS BY RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN,
SYRIAN PRESIDENT BASHAR AL-ASSAD ON RESULTS OF THEIR TALKS
IN THE KREMLIN JANUARY 25, 2005**

<http://www.president.kremlin.ru>

Vladimir Putin: Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, let me again welcome our esteemed guest, President Bashar al-Assad of Syria. This is our guest's first visit to Russia and I am convinced that the negotiations we had will be an important landmark and open a new essential page in bilateral relations.

Our peoples have had ties of sincere fellow feelings to each other for many years and this is a reliable foundation for partnership based on the principles of equality, mutual respect and trust to each other.

Today we had very substantial and, in my opinion, very successful talks with President al-Assad. Their main result is the signing of a declaration on further development of relations of friendship and cooperation. I am convinced that this declaration will open up new vistas for business ties and cultural exchanges, for direct contacts between our citizens.

During the meeting we discussed a broad range of bilateral issues. First of all, we focused on the development of trade and economic relations between our countries. Syria and Russia have a long record of interaction and successful work on major projects. But the current level of trade and economic relations certainly cannot satisfy us: in our opinion, the level has been too low.

We have positive trends in the economic sphere, and our goal is securing those positive trends. First of all, this concerns cooperation in spheres traditional for our countries such as hydroelectric power generation, oil and gas production and construction of transport facilities. I believe that the Russian- Syrian Business Council established last year will widen the range of bilateral cooperation by adding new projects and establishing direct contacts.

During negotiations, we resolved the problem of Syria's debts to the Russian Federation. We have managed to resolve it on a compromise base acceptable for both parties, thus creating good preconditions for the development of trade and economic relations in the future.

During the meeting we discussed a broad range of issues on the international agenda. In this connection I would like to note that our countries favor the formation of a stable and democratic global order, a global order that would be based on the principles of international law and would rule out the use of force or interference in internal affairs of sovereign states.

The situation in the Middle East was high on the agenda. We hail Syria's intention to engage in political dialogue with Israel, Syria's readiness to resume talks without any preliminary conditions. Our opinions coincide in that lasting peace in the Middle East is only possible if it has a comprehensive nature. This settlement should rely on the commonly recognized international legal form, the UN Security Council's resolutions and the Madrid principles.

We have paid a lot of attention to the Palestinian problem. Like our Syrian partners, we have supported the intention of the new leadership of the autonomy led by Mahmoud Abbas to look for political settlement with Israel. The Road Map drawn up by the Quartet and approved by the UN Security Council will serve this goal. I am convinced that the observance of all of its provisions by all parties would be a real way to the resumption of the peace process.

When considering the situation in Iraq, we noted that the international community should invigorate its efforts aimed at establishing peaceful life in that country. The restoration of the economy and social infrastructure in Iraq has been among the top priorities. In this respect both Russia and Syria could make their contribution to the realization of joint projects.

During negotiations we certainly discussed pooling our efforts in the struggle against terrorism. In this connection we find it expedient to broaden interaction between special services and agencies and between the defense ministries.

We are grateful to Syria for its position in the realization of the decision of the Organization of the Islamic Conference on granting Russia an observer status.

In conclusion let me thank President al-Assad for constructive dialogue of trust. I am convinced that relations between Russia and Syria will continue to work for the interests of our peoples, promote the strengthening of peace and stability in the Middle East in general.

Thank you for your attention.

Bashar al-Assad: Mr. President, this visit is taking place in the framework of historic relations between our countries which will work for the strengthening of those relations in all spheres and in the wake of dramatic events of the past two years, which has given a new impetus to our relations.

Our negotiations were held in a friendly and very good atmosphere and we discussed all issues of mutual interest, including regional, international and bilateral.

As for our bilateral relations, they should be based on the principles of mutual respect and interest. And we have agreed that those relations will be mutually beneficial. In this framework we approached the solution to a long-standing issue -- Syria's debt to **Russia**, and we expect this to give a new impetus to our economic ties.

We have also signed a number of agreements, particularly in the power energy sphere. We have discussed the creation of a free economic zone, and we have agreed that discussions on the issue will continue. This problem will be discussed by the two countries' experts. A statement has been signed on ways to deal with those problems in the future.

We have discussed peace settlement in the Middle East and ways to establish peace in our region. We have stressed that the obstacles to the peace process in the Middle East could eventually have their effect on all countries in the region. And this may further increase the level of violence and undermine the foundations of stability in the region. We noted that it is necessary to continue cooperation with the purpose of resolving the Middle East problem on the basis of the Madrid Convention and the UN Security Council's Resolutions 242 and 138 and other international resolutions. Plus the principle of peace in exchange for land, plus the Arab peace initiative set forth in Beirut in 2002. We have agreed that it is necessary to continue negotiations without any preliminary conditions, which would allow reaching a comprehensive and fair solution, moving Israeli troops out of all Arab lands occupied since 1967 and creating a Palestinian state with the capital of al-Quds (Jerusalem). It was noted that it is necessary to make sure that the Middle East should be totally free from mass destruction weapons.

As for Iraq, we agreed that it is necessary to retain Iraq's integrity and its national identity and that we should promote the peace process which is underway there, including the election process, while underscoring the need to have all layers of the Iraqi people involved.

As for the international situation, we have agreed that the world should be more active, that other countries should also act more energetically in this field, and that it is necessary to bolster the United Nations' role in maintaining peace worldwide. We are convinced, though, that comprehensive reform of the United Nations is required.

We have denounced terrorism and we are ready to combat it. Our opinions coincide on the roots of this disease and on ways to treat it.

In conclusion we voice our support for Mr. Putin's policy which has reasserted Russia's active presence in the global arena. We also express gratitude to Russia for support of our legitimate rights.

Attachment B

http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/01/25/1725_type82914_83031.shtml

PRESIDENT PUTIN: Dear Mr President,

Dear colleagues,

I am very glad to welcome the Syrian delegation to Moscow, headed by President Bashar al-Assad, who is worthily continuing the glorious traditions of his father, President Hafez al-Assad. Hafez al-Assad was a great friend of our people and our country, he was a political figure of international scale. And I would like to stress that at the one-to-one talk with the President of Syria, Mr. Bashar al-Assad once more showed that the warm relations of friendship between our peoples and countries, which have a long tradition, have been maintained and have good prospects.

On our part, we are firmly resolved to continue on the path of developing fruitful and mutually beneficial cooperation both on the bilateral level, and in continuing our efforts together with the international community, with our partners, on regulating the situation in the region as a whole. We also expect fruitful joint work with our Syrian partners.

Welcome!

BASHAR AL-ASAD: Thank you very much, Mr President. You talked of the historical side of our relations: we are still feeling this historical unity, because there are tens of thousands of graduates from your country in Syria who occupy key positions both in the economy and administration. We also have major fundamental projects which Russia has taken part in, and of course is currently taking part in, with your assistance.

The goal of this visit is to solve certain tasks of developing our relations.

Your country is very influential on the international stage. We highly value your position, and we have common, coordinated interests. We look to the future of economic and trade relations, and hope that they reach the political level that exists between us.

Naturally, there are several issues that we could discuss, but first of all I would like to stress the importance of the agreements that we signed today.
